

Good news?
A Sermon by Rev. Frances Savill
Sunday January 23, 2022

Luke 4:16-30

This is one of the passages of scripture that I always find troubling.
Can you picture the scene?

Have you been following the narrative as Luke describes Jesus' life and ministry?

Jesus, born in Bethlehem, promised by an angel to Mary, this child, born Messiah. Elizabeth sang the praises of this child before he was born, angels proclaimed his birth, shepherds in the fields returned praising God, Anna and Simeon sang songs of praise and hope when the child was dedicated in the Temple.

John the Baptist, the prophet who was to prepare the way for the Messiah, recognized Jesus, the heavens opened at Jesus' baptism and the Spirit of God descended on Jesus, declaring Him God's beloved Son.

The Spirit of God drove Jesus out into the wilderness, to do battle with the tempter. Jesus emerged victorious, he had remained faithful.

Jesus began his teaching ministry.

Verses 14-15 read: *"Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.
¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone."*

And then Jesus walks into his home town Synagogue.

He picks up the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and he reads the words that everyone is longing to hear:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives*

*and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

This was the news they had longed to hear. They were the oppressed who would be set free. The "year of the Lord's favour" was the year of restoration, the year that the land would be returned to them.

These words were spoken by Isaiah about a day of healing, a day of restoration, when God's people would be exulted over their enemies.

Isaiah goes on to say: *Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines; 6 but you shall be called priests of the Lord, you shall be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory.*

There is no message more welcome. And this was a homegrown Messiah – Jesus was one of their own. And very shortly everything turns. Their first reaction was "everyone spoke well of him", and then suddenly they were trying to throw him off a cliff.

How did things change so quickly? The crowd heard the words they longed to hear, but the next moment they were trying to kill the messenger. Can you imagine Jesus coming in here this morning, walking up to the lectern to read scripture and he speaks the greatest words of healing and promise in the Bible. He tells us that those words are fulfilled in him, then he sat down to preach, and within moments the congregation is trying to lynch him.

How could that happen? And if it happened in the Synagogue, and Luke thought it was important to tell us, I'm pretty sure there is instruction and warning for us also.

I find this passage so distressing because there is Jesus, teaching his own people and first they try to throw him off a cliff, "But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way."

Lots of scholars point out that as Jesus says “a prophet is not acceptable in his own town.” What they know of him, that he’s Joseph’s son, keeps them from seeing the truth that he is the Messiah.

But I think there is more going on in the passage, because what really gets everyone irate is that Jesus is not going to fulfill all their dreams for themselves – and Jesus is making it clear that he isn’t just sent to Israel.

In the beginning God had a plan to partner with all humanity to care for this world. We, all people, were to be God’s own, we were tasked with learning from God to fill the earth and have dominion over it. But we chose to rebel, to do things our own way, not to trust God, and we wanted to be wise in our own eyes, taking wisdom, not learning God’s ways.

So God chose one people, who God would lead, that God would teach, that God would form as his own people, and they were to be a light to the nations, a blessing to the whole earth.

Israel was always blessed to be a blessing. It was never just about Israel. God’s plan from the beginning was for all people of the earth to partner and be God’s people.

Jesus brought up stories of Naaman the leper and the story of woman. They were both outsiders, enemies of God’s people, who God chose to save and heal. Jesus is making it clear from the start that his ministry is greater than just Israel. God is concerned for all people.

Jesus is setting a course that is different than expected. Jesus isn’t in the wish fulfillment business. Jesus’ agenda is much greater than returning the land to a group of Israelites.

I entitled the message “Good news?” with a question mark.

Sometimes we start to think that God should be serving us, fulfilling our demands, prayers, needs and wants.

We think we know what God should do. We are wise, in our own eyes. We have a sense of the way things should be, and that includes that I should be treated special, and be protected, and my life should be easy and good and... And if that is what you are looking for, then Jesus does not bring good news.

Because Jesus' mission is about so much more. Jesus came to bring healing and wholeness to all people, he came to bring life to the dead, and light to those who were sitting in darkness. He came to bring access to God to all people, and a new day of salvation for all who would turn to him.

Jesus invites us to take up a cross and follow him.

His ways are not our ways. His plans are not our plans. His word of truth is like a sword that divides. A group rose up against Jesus and tried to throw him off a cliff. And Jesus passed through the midst of them and was gone.

Everywhere Jesus went some believed, and followed him, and some lined up in opposition to Jesus and his teaching.

It is the same today. Jesus will not conform to our plans, our ideas, our wisdom.

But to those who will follow him, where he leads, this is the greatest news, it is the way to life abundant and eternal.

Amen.